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RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1167
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3199
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2585
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE
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RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000061

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (GORKOWSKI)

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KG

SUBJECT: KYRGYZ RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY WARM TO EVANGELICALS,
COLD ON NEW RELIGION LAW

REF: BISHKEK 43

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Classified By: Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador held a reception for members of the local Christian community to gauge their reactions to the new law restricting religious activity. Although there is reportedly tension between the Orthodox Church and evangelical groups, conversation was relaxed and friendly, with participants more than once referring to their common purposes and shared beliefs. Orthodox priests minimized the law's potential effects on their church, but broadly disapproved of the law and the government's intervention in the religious sphere. An evangelical church leader agreed that militant Islamic groups, at which the law was supposedly aimed, are a problem, but said the law will have little effect on them. Rather, the law will provide license to anti-Christian Muslims, and make existing Christian groups vulnerable. End summary.

¶2. (C) On the evening following President Bakiyev's signing of a new law restricting religious activity (reftel) Ambassador held a reception for members of the local Christian community to gauge their reactions. Except for the head of the State Agency on Religious Affairs, Kanybek Osmonaliev, who was called away to deal with a problem of pilgrims returning from the Hajj, all invitees attended the January 12 reception at her residence, and participated enthusiastically in the discussion. Six priests from different parts of Kyrgyzstan (one flew in from Osh for the occasion) represented the Orthodox Church, including Father Pavel Senegubov, the head of the Orthodox Church in Kyrgyzstan. Jesuit Bishop Nickolaus Messer represented the small Catholic community in Kyrgyzstan: A native of Kazakhstan and descended from Germans exiled by Stalin, Messer emphasized the deep historical roots of Catholicism in Central Asia. Pastors Alexander Kim and Alexander Shumilin represented the evangelical Protestant churches in Kyrgyzstan. Although there is reportedly tension between the established Orthodox Church and fast-spreading evangelical groups, conversation was relaxed and friendly, with

participants more than once referring to their common purposes and shared beliefs.

¶13. (C) The evening began with Father Senegubov offering a toast to the Ambassador, thanking her for the invitation and wishing her success in her work here. Subsequent discussion ranged from plans to expand Bishkek's St. Vladimir Church, which had been halted when they discovered they were building over a fault line, to the harassment that even Orthodox priests face in transiting Sheryemyetovo II airport in Moscow. Several guests discussed the succession process for the new Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, noting that Kyrgyzstan's churches have three votes in the process, and that they favor Metropolitan Kirill. The Ambassador noted that she had known Metropolitan Kirill since serving in Moscow in 1989, and the exchange of anecdotes about him established a cordial atmosphere for subsequent discussions.

¶14. (C) Perhaps inevitably, the conversation among the nine Central Asian churchmen and the female Ambassador turned to cultural differences in religion and gender. The Ambassador noted that women play a significant role in many U.S. churches, and women can be ordained as priests in some. The Orthodox priests accepted that difference, but indicated no immediate intention to begin ordaining women in their own churches. The guests were particularly interested in the religious beliefs within the U.S. military. Bishop Messer noted that for a time, the participation of U.S military families from the Embassy had nearly doubled the number of attendees at his weekly Mass, and another priest wondered if attendance at religious services was a requirement for serving in the U.S. military. The Ambassador explained that their religious activity is entirely voluntary, as freedom of

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religion is a right protected by the U.S. Constitution.

¶15. (C) In counterpoint, the Ambassador noted that earlier that day, President Bakiyev had signed the new law restricting religious groups, and asked her guests for their opinions. Pastor Shumilin, the head of the Union of the Evangelical Christian-Baptists of Kyrgyzstan, described his group's efforts to lobby against the bill, and his deep concern for the future of his church. Looking for support, Shumilin turned to Father Igor Dronov, an Orthodox priest in Bishkek, and asked him: "Aren't you afraid, as Russians, that they'll try to use this law against you?" (Note: He was referring to parts of the law that appear aimed at discouraging religious activity by foreigners. End Note.) Dronov replied that the Orthodox Church had been in Central Asia for over 200 years, since long before there was a Kyrgyzstan, implying that Orthodoxy has deeper roots, and greater legitimacy, than the current Kyrgyz Government. But even while the Orthodox Church representatives denied that the government could use the new law to constrain the Orthodox Church, they broadly disapproved of the law's limitations on religious freedom and the government's intervention in the religious sphere.

¶16. (C) Kim, an ethnic Korean born in Kyrgyzstan, and pastor of the evangelical "Church of the Lord," said he had had numerous conversations about the law with government officials, who believe it will address the problem of Saudi-funded militant Islamic groups in the South. Kim agreed that these groups were a problem, but argued that since they are clandestine anyway, the law will have little effect on them. Rather, the law will provide license to those Kyrgyz Muslims who already stigmatize Christians, want to make it impossible for Muslims to convert away from their religion, and seek to push Christian groups out of their communities. Kim said that he has frequent contact with Korean missionary groups, and he worries that this law will force many of them underground, leaving them legally vulnerable and forced to pay protection money in order to continue their work. The one positive effect of the new law, Kim said, may be that it will lead the many small and often

squabbling evangelical Christian groups in Kyrgyzstan to come together, so that they qualify for registration under the new law. (Note: The new law limits religious activity to groups that have passed the registration threshold of 200 members. End note.)

Comment

¶7. (C) Although the new religion law, if implemented energetically, will restrict and even outlaw the many evangelical groups that have arrived in Kyrgyzstan since independence, the Orthodox priests offered no defense of the new law, and made it plain to their evangelical co-religionists that they did not support it -- at least in a private conversation. This show of unified disapprobation may be due in part to the fact that evangelical groups have reportedly made the greatest inroads among the Kyrgyz Muslim population, and therefore are not seen to be poaching on Orthodox terrain.

GFOELLER